

Revisiting Robert Rainy

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Robert Rainy (1826–1906) looms large in the history of the Church in Victorian Scotland. As principal of New College, as three-time moderator of the Free Church/United Free Church of Scotland (1887, 1900 and 1905), and as the ‘unofficial “leader” of the General Assembly’,¹ Rainy was paramount in guiding his church through tumultuous times.² He cautiously oversaw the Free Church’s acceptance of the use of organs and hymns in worship, and begrudged its opening up to the theory of evolution, biblical criticism, and creedal revision. He also led the charge to persuade Westminster to disestablish the Church of Scotland. Having orchestrated union with the Reformed Presbyterians in 1876, he then guided the Free Church through tortuous negotiations into union with the United Presbyterians in 1900; after the House of Lord’s decision to award all former Free Church property to a group of dissentients, he coordinated the new United Free Church’s legal and political protest. His leadership savvy, which was often deployed to dissuade progressives within his denomination from rushing ahead and dissuade conservatives from decamping outright, was perhaps nowhere more evident then during the protracted heresy case of

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¹ K. Ross, ‘Rainy, Robert (1826–1906)’, in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 690.

² For background to this period see: G. Parsons, ‘Victorian Britain’s Other Establishment: The Transformations of Scottish Presbyterianism’, in G. Parsons (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain. Vol. 1: Traditions* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 117–145; A. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843–1874* (Edinburgh, 1975); idem, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland 1874–1900* (Edinburgh, 1978); especially A. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland’s Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1983).

William Robertson Smith (1876–81), the most famous such case in the nineteenth century and a defining moment in the development of biblical studies in the English-speaking world.³ Rainy was probably not ‘unquestionably the greatest living Scotsman’ as Prime Minister Gladstone had claimed in 1895, but he was unquestionably a great Scottish churchman whose reputation and impact reached far beyond the denominational and national boundaries of his nation.⁴

Rainy’s biographer P. Carnegie Simpson highlighted the ‘strange irony’ of his subject, who yearned for the quiet life of a professor, but who found himself instead ‘making’ church history rather than merely teaching it.⁵ Standard Scottish church histories penned by Burleigh, Reid and Henderson among others all eulogise Rainy as an ‘ecclesiastical statesman’.⁶ On occasion descriptions become predestinarian – Reid claims that Rainy was ‘clearly marked for leadership in the Free Kirk when he was only twenty-eight years old’ – or panegyric, as in Peter Bayne’s recollection of one of Rainy’s first public speeches, where he placated an Assembly consternated by the reputed heterodoxy of some seminarians.⁷

At this moment a young man, with light golden hair and general aspect of calm brightness, like a figure out of a Daniel vision, appeared in the midst, and drew upon himself all eyes.... As his words flowed on, it was felt that ... the whole situation changed. The speaker was Mr. Rainy, who had suddenly become famous in the Church....⁸

³ See R. Riesen, *Criticism and Faith in Late Victorian Scotland* (Lanham, MD., 1988).

⁴ Cited in P. Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy*, Vol. 2 (London, 1909), p. 163.

⁵ Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy*, Vol. 1, p. 146.

⁶ J. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (London, 1960), p. 365; J. Reid, *Kirk and Nation: The Story of the Reformed Church of Scotland* (London, 1960), p. 151; G. Henderson, *The Church of Scotland: A Short History* (Edinburgh, 1939), p. 151.

⁷ Reid, *Kirk and Nation*, p. 151.

⁸ Peter Bayne, *The Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1894), pp. vi–vii.

Considering Rainy as first and foremost ‘a leader of ecclesiastical policy’ is justified, given his remarkable career.⁹ However, it has carried with it the danger of overlooking the ideas that guided Rainy’s career – such that he is rendered by many scholars as a politician rather than a theologian: pragmatic, crafty, and wielding enormous authority in his church by force of personality rather than by principle. Not unexpectedly, critics from the continuing Free Church of Scotland, hostile to ‘Black Rainy’ for allowing traditional Presbyterian views of the Bible and Confession to be undermined, have underlined his purely expedient solution to the Robertson Smith case: a de facto toleration of the ‘believing criticism’ that Robertson Smith promoted at the cost of his teaching job.¹⁰ Similarly, Rainy’s masterstroke, the 1892 Declaratory Act on the Westminster Confession, which sought to conserve the authority of the Free Church’s subordinate standard while permitting wider interpretations of the Calvinist doctrines therein that were vexing Victorians, eroded the theological bedrock of the Free Church for purely pragmatic reasons. Yet even impartial historians similarly portray Rainy as basically unprincipled (albeit personally pious). Kenneth Ross writes: ‘The fact that his leadership was characterized by complacency and opportunism, rather than initiative and

⁹ Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy*, Vol. 1, p. 146.

¹⁰ Most recently S. Finlayson, *Unity and Diversity: The Founders of the Free Church of Scotland* (Fearn, 2010), especially pp. 8, 287–300. Older critics include: A. Stewart and J. Cameron, *The Free Church of Scotland 1843–1910* (Edinburgh, 1910); J. Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1943), pp. 276–331; G. Collins *The Heritage of Our Fathers* (Edinburgh, 1976), pp. 64–119. Also see R. Finlayson, ‘How Liberal Theology Infected Scotland’, in *Reformed Theological Writings* (Fearn, 1996), pp. 194–198. I. Campbell, *Fixing the Indemnity: The Life and Work of Sir George Adam Smith (1856–1942)* (Milton Keynes, 2004), pp. 128–139, briefly treats Rainy’s role in the proceedings against G. A. Smith.

conviction, accounts in part for the loss of ground which the FC suffered in his time.’¹¹

It is indisputable that Rainy was an ecclesiastical politician – even one whose leadership was not above craftiness. His friend W. R. Nicoll admitted that one could often overhear in Free Church circles that ‘Dr. Rainy was misty as well as Rainy’!¹² Nevertheless, this article intends to reconsider Robert Rainy through his ideas. For when Simpson’s biography, the *Acts and Proceedings of the Free Church Assembly*, and other sources for ‘ecclesiastical biography’ are read apart from Rainy’s few publications, we forfeit any chance of the detecting the theological convictions behind his leadership. Yet as early as his inaugural lecture as New College’s church history professor, as well as his very first publication (a lengthy review of John Henry Newman’s *Apologia pro vita sua* (1864)), one theme already figures prominently: that because God has revealed his will and purpose in history, the Church’s life, doctrines, and practices must be understood through the category of history.¹³ Above all, this topic is investigated with prescience and thoroughness in his 1873 Cunningham Lectures, *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine*; it is revisited in every one of his rare mature publications, and crops up at every flashpoint in his well-known ecclesiastical career.¹⁴

Rainy in fact deserves credit as a thinker who took the lead among nineteenth-century English-speaking Protestant theologians

¹¹ Ross, ‘Rainy, Robert (1826–1906)’, p. 691. See similar comments in: Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland*, p. 365; Henderson, *The Church of Scotland*, p. 151; Drummond and Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland*, pp. 320, 324; and throughout R. Mackintosh, *Principal Rainy: A Biographical Study* (London, 1907).

¹² As recounted by his friend W. Nicoll, ‘Robert Rainy’, in *Princes of the Church* (London, 1921), p. 198.

¹³ Rainy, *Introductory Lecture, Delivered in the New College, Edinburgh, on 7th November, 1862* (Edinburgh, 1862); idem, ‘*Apologia pro Vita Sua*. By John Henry Newman, D. D. London: Longman & Co., 1864’, *North British Review* 41 (1864), 85–104.

¹⁴ Published the following year as *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, 1874).

in confronting the knotty problem of the historical development of church doctrine that had been thrust upon British churches by Newman's epoch-making 1845 *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* and reinforced by the growing influence of German historical scholarship on British divinity. His *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* is notable for the doctrinal implications of an insistence on God's revelation *in* history. Rainy drew upon a concept of 'salvation history' then vogue among some German theologians to argue that doctrine was not God's truth directly deposited in the Church or Bible but rather the church's interpretation through the ages of God's mighty acts in history. This was a tacit admission that doctrine, being historically conditioned, was also historically conditional – although Rainy was quick to insist that the clarity of revelation in history ensured the basic continuity of dogma and the essential shape of church confessions, including the venerable Westminster Confession. Seen in the light of *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine*, the controversial 1892 Declaratory Act, which most historians judge as the example par excellence of his 'ecclesiastical statesmanship', cannot be simply attributed to either pragmatic leadership or theological equivocation. It appears rather as the capstone of a lifelong concern to ensure the constancy of the Church's confession of faith through the tumult of historical change. Indeed, what has escaped the notice of many of Rainy's interpreters is that his ecclesiastical career was presaged with the 1874 publication of the *Delivery and Development of Doctrine*. Here, a mediating programme lies sketched out as blueprint for the future of the Reformed tradition, which reveals that this 'ecclesiastical statesman', far from being a merely opportunistic churchman, was a careful thinker whose actions were closely determined by his ideas – ideas that were themselves sometimes in advance of their time in Britain.¹⁵

¹⁵ Two evangelicals at Union Seminary in New York, Henry Boynton Smith (1815–77) and William Shedd (1820–94), were wrestling with the problem of doctrinal development at around the same time. See W. Stoeber, 'Henry Boynton Smith and

German Neo-Lutheranism and the *Delivery and Development of Doctrine*

To comprehend Rainy's *Delivery and Development of Doctrine* – the single work most revealing of its author's mind – and its impact on subsequent Scottish Presbyterianism, focus needs to shift from Edinburgh to Erlangen. Rainy's keen attention to the *evangelische Theologie* then being imported by Scots was typical of his generation, and the argument in the *Delivery and Development of Doctrine* divulges a clear link of critical importance between its author and the faculty of theology at the University of Erlangen, which at that time was stamped by a vigorous, pan-German evangelical movement called neo-Lutheranism [*Neuluthertum*].¹⁶ This movement was, on one hand, resolutely opposed to all ecclesiastical, political, or theological attempts to detract from the inviolability of the Lutheran Church and confessions.¹⁷ On the other hand, as many neo-Lutheran theologians had been converted during the Awakening, their allegiance to classical Lutheranism was tempered by Biblicism and a deep concern for the experience of conversion. At the same time, neo-Lutheranism was deeply indebted to the philosophies of history of Hegel and Schelling then suffusing German thought and culture. As a result, this movement had romantic reverence for the Church's past and sought to recognise growth and variation within its history.

the German Theology of History', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 24 (1968), 69–89; H. Bowden, 'W. G. T. Shedd and A. C. McGiffert on the Development of Dogma', *Journal of Presbyterian History* 49 (1971), 246–265.

¹⁶ On the links between evangelical German theology and Scotland in this period see T. Statham, "'Landloup' Students of Divinity": Scottish Presbyterians in German Theology Faculties, c. 1840–1914', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 110 (2010), 40–65.

¹⁷ On neo-Lutheranism see: F. Kantzenbach and J. Mehlhausen, 'Neuluthertum', in G. Mueller et al. (eds), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Bd. 24 (Berlin, 1994), 327–341; K. Beyerslag, *Die Erlanger Theologie* (Erlangen, 1993); G. Hornig, 'Die Theologie des Neuluthertums', in Carl Andresen (ed.), *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte*, Bd. 2 (Göttingen, 1984), pp. 174–189.

Evangelicals in Scotland (and America) were deeply interested in this creatively conservative theological movement, with whose proponents they shared awakened hearts and an orthodox Protestant mind. Rainy himself appears to have been an attentive 'distance student' of Erlangen's star professor J. C. K. von Hofmann (1810–77). Hofmann, whom Karl Barth considered to be the greatest conservative theologian of the century, was widely read in Scotland and sought out by Scottish students for his stalwart defence of supernatural revelation, God's gracious salvation in Jesus Christ, and the authority of the Bible.¹⁸ *Development and Delivery of Christian Doctrine* explicitly cites Hofmann only twice, but those familiar with the unique contours of the so-called Erlangen theology affiliated with Hofmann will notice the catchphrases and ideas of this school all over Rainy's masterwork: 'theology of fact', 'the proof from Scripture' [*Schriftbeweis*], and above all 'salvation history' [*Heilsgeschichte*], with the Bible as its record or memorial [*Denkmal*].¹⁹ 'I have long suspected, though have never been able to prove', wrote John Dickie in 1937, 'that von Hofmann, who was in the main a Conservative influence in German Theology, acted in a contrary direction in Scotland'.²⁰ While Dickie's hunch could be proved from a number of angles, for the purposes of this paper, it is Hofmann's understanding of revelation as salvation history

¹⁸ K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, (trans.) J. Bowen (1959; reprint, Grand Rapids, 2005), p. 96. On Hofmann see also: M. Becker, 'Appreciating the Life and Work of Johann v. Hofmann', *Lutheran Quarterly* 17 (2003), 177–193; E. Hahn, 'J. Chr. K. von Hofmanns Programm theologischer Erneuerung. Dargestellt anhand seines Werkes "Der Schriftbeweis"', in E. Hahn et al. (eds), *Dein Wort ist die Wahrheit* (Wuppertal, 1997), pp. 65–82.

¹⁹ G. Oehler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 2 Bd. (Stuttgart, 1873–1874) was a member of Hofmann's school to whom Rainy referred.

²⁰ J. Dickie, *Fifty Years of British Theology* (Edinburgh, 1937), pp. 87–88.

[*Heilsgeschichte*] that demands close attention for its influence on Rainy.²¹

It was Hofmann who coined the now well-known theological word *Heilsgeschichte* – it became an identifying mark of the Erlangen theology.²² His concept of salvation history was closely aligned with his concern – common to many Christians in his uncertain age – to secure faith's certainty. This led him to describe Christianity as foremost fact rather than a set of doctrines, a moral ethos, or an institution (although it included all these aspects).²³ And like many sons of the Awakening, it was the *experienced* fact of being united with Christ as Lord and Redeemer that provided the starting point for reflection upon faith. This led him to proceed from personal religious consciousness to full-fledged orthodoxy. A Christian does not come to faith through the inductive study of the Bible or by submitting to the dogmas of the Church, but comes *back* to these things upon having experienced fullness of new life in Christ, and having been made certain of the reality of that experience through the inner testimony of the Spirit.²⁴ The sure and certain fact that believers have of new life in Christ (what Hofmann calls the *Tatbestand*), which we experience when we are 'born again', is confirmed and sustained by the Scriptural witness to the historical facts (*Taten*) of God's salvation; both are integrated in the wider fact

²¹ There is a strong affinity between Hofmann's doctrine of reconciliation (which had ignited a paper war among neo-Lutherans) and the atonement theory of John MacLeod Campbell. Scots kept abreast of all this through articles like 'The Lutheran Doctrine of Christ's Vicarious Death', *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* 10 (1861), 123–171 and J. Candlish, 'Hofmann and his Opponents', *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, vol. 14 (1865), 294–318.

²² A. Greig, 'A Critical Note on the Origin of the Term *Heilsgeschichte*', *Expository Times* 87 (1976), 118–119. See also J. Rohls, *Protestantische Theologie der Neuzeit*, Bd. 1 (Tübingen, 1997), pp. 564–6, 681–9.

²³ Hofmann, *Enzyklopädie der Theologie* (Nordlingen, 1879), p. 3.

²⁴ Hofmann, *Der Schriftbeweis*, Bd. 1, 2nd edn (Nordlingen, 1857), pp. 10, 31.

or reality (*Tatsache*) of salvation history, which has as its goal the union of humankind and God in Jesus Christ.²⁵

All this can appear as rather abstract, until we notice three very concrete challenges of Hofmann's *Heilsgeschichte* to the classical Protestant understanding of the Bible and doctrine. First, history is revelation and not merely the medium of revelation.²⁶ Given this presupposition, Hofmann charged Protestant orthodoxy with partaking of the same error as rationalism, namely, ransacking the Bible to find isolated truths, then enshrining them as timeless expressions of the divine mind.²⁷ When Christianity is defined as a set of dogmas, he argued, the Bible is inevitably read as a compendium of inspired teaching – the Old Testament has been especially ill served by this traditional habit.²⁸ On the contrary, the Bible is the record of salvation history, a divine memorial [*Denkmal*] of God's great acts and deeds for the redemption of the world as well as the original impact of that history. Scripture's authority resides in its exclusive recording of the facts of salvation history, which then function as the measure for the experience of those incorporated into that historical continuum. Its sufficiency lies in its accurate recounting of salvation history, rather than any sleeve of doctrines it purportedly contains as expressive of the divine mind.²⁹

Second, despite his measured criticism of Protestant Orthodoxy, Hofmann was no despiser of doctrine. He was deeply (though,

²⁵ Hofmann, *Weissagung und Erfüllung im Alte und Neue Testament*, Bd. 1 (Nordlingen, 1841), p. 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 33. J. Lauster, *Prinzip und Methode. Die Transformation des protestantischen Schriftprinzips durch der historische Kritik von Schleiermacher bis zu Gegenwart* (Tübingen, 2004), pp. 163–184 provides an excellent analysis.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3. Berlin professor and neo-Lutheran E. Hengstenberg's massive *Christologie des Alten Testaments* [ET: *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on the Messianic Predictions*, 4 Vols, (trans.) T. Meyer (Edinburgh, 1854–58)], a work widely read by evangelicals, comes under heavy fire for its 'dogmatic' approach. See also A. Dieckhoff, 'System and Scripture- Dr. v. Hofmann', *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* 10 (1861), 553–575;

²⁹ Hofmann, *Enzyklopädie*, p. 252.

unlike most neo-Lutherans, not slavishly) attached to the Lutheran *Book of Concord* because he believed it best reflects the *Tatbestand* of salvation and *Taten* of salvation history. For him, salvation history was primary; doctrine was second order reflection by the Church upon God's great acts and words in history. Although the Bible, properly speaking, does not yield a system of doctrines, doctrine is the inevitable outcome of Christians' reflection upon the fact of their faith, and it is the essential self-articulation of the Church's part and place in salvation history.³⁰

Third, Christian doctrine, i.e., the Church's necessary confession of its experience of union with Christ and the great facts of redemption history, takes place within the continuum of salvation history and manifests, therefore, both continuity and change. Although God's revelation recorded in Scripture and experienced in the new birth was completed once for all time, it is capable of unending interpretation. This entails a development of doctrine over the history of the Church. There is, as Erlangen theologians liked to emphasize, 'an incremental growth of the Church in insight into revealed truth.'³¹ Hofmann himself, while not specialising in the field of the history of dogma proper, exhibits throughout his works an abiding interest in the history of the Church's 'process of realization' of God's original revelation.³² For him, this process has created a body of dogma which was the inevitable germination of the divine revelation planted in the organism of the Church; never to be superseded, it was still capable of further insight and improved interpretation.

Hofmann defended his theological method as simply a new way of expressing old truth. Indeed, the conservative intent of his

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 3–7.

³¹ Hornig, 'Die Theologie des Neuluthertum', p. 178. On the neo-Lutheran writing on the history of dogma see especially F. Kantzenbach, *Evangelium und Dogma: die Bewältigung des theologischen Problems der Dogmengeschichte Protestantismus* (Stuttgart, 1959), 153–164.

³² The phrase comes from the neo-Lutheran T. Kliefoth, *Einleitung in die Dogmengeschichte* (Parchim, 1839), p. 81.

theological programme needs to be underscored. The resolutely historical understanding of revelation at the centre of his version of salvation history aimed to secure for his century the old Protestant esteem for Scripture's unique revelatory function and normative authority for the Church. Similarly, his attempt to root the Church's confession of faith in the continuum of *Heilsgeschichte* was to ensure both the necessity of Christian doctrine and its constancy over the ages. Although the rationalist theology of the Enlightenment had believed that the greatest weapon against traditional Christianity was the proof that church dogma had changed and developed over history – David Strauss had famously argued that 'the true critic of dogma is its own history'³³ – neo-Lutherans like Hofmann could turn that argument on its head through their use of idealist philosophy. If the Church was an organism, born 'from above' into the warp and woof of human history, every aspect of that organism, including its doctrines, should be expected to grow to a divinely determined end.³⁴

Rainy's remark before the 1880 assembly of the Presbyterian Alliance, that 'thoughts, which in Germany would be weighed in a speculative system, exert their influence among us in a looser, but an equally effective way', surely carries a biographical intimation.³⁵ For when attention is turned back to Edinburgh from Erlangen, it seems clear that Rainy has taken several 'thoughts' from Hofmann on revelation, Scripture, and doctrine that form the lineaments of his argument in the *Delivery and Development of Doctrine*. These

³³ D. Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre* (1840), p. 7. Cited by Kantzenbach, *Evangelium und Dogma*, p. 185. See the study by M. Lipps, *Dogmengeschichte als Dogmenkritik: Die Anfänge der Dogmengeschichtsschreibung in der Zeit der Spätaufklärung* (Bern, 1983).

³⁴ On the link between ideological conservatism and the metaphor of 'organism' see H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), pp. 15–16, 25–29.

³⁵ Rainy, 'Modern Theological Thought', in J. Dales and R. Patterson (eds), *Report of the Proceedings of the Second General Council of the Presbyterian Alliance*, (Philadelphia, 1880), p. 82.

theological ideas demand a closer look as determinative for his ecclesiastical career, particularly those controversial efforts for church union and creedal revision.

What is apparent from the outset is Rainy's concern (like Hofmann) to restate the importance of Christian doctrine for a church growing less sure of its creed.³⁶ For one thing, he diagnoses a distemper toward doctrinal religion that is widespread, growing, and, admittedly, not always unjustified. Theological pedantry has created a dense system of opaque teaching that weighs heavily on many believers' consciences and echoes weakly in their hearts.³⁷ If previous eras of the Church saw strife over the legitimacy of particular doctrines, nowadays 'Bible Christians' parley with romantics like Matthew Arnold as well as rationalists against the right of doctrine to even exist. At the same time, Rainy concedes that continental scholarship is putting beyond doubt that 'doctrine has been a matter of development – it has grown and become by virtue of processes and tendencies of human minds'.³⁸ Christians are becoming unsettled by scholarship from Germany and elsewhere that show the 'faith once delivered to the saints' (Jude 3) as a centuries-long process rather than a once-for-all-time delivery. Little wonder, thought Rainy, that troubled Christians are simply abandoning their historically compromised confessions of faith for simple biblical belief.

Yet Rainy serves notice that he will not surrender to his age the inherently doctrinal nature of Christian faith. Against contemporaries who would flee the scarred pages of church history for the sanctuary of Scripture, Rainy declares impossible a retreat to the Bible alone. However much church doctrine should aspire to be biblical, it is never just a reproduction of biblical teaching.

³⁶ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 1–33.

³⁷ Moral objections to traditional doctrines like hell, atonement and original sin were also contributory. See further M. Bartholomew, 'The Moral Critique of Victorian Orthodoxy', in G. Parsons (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain, Vol. 2: Controversies* (Manchester, 1988), 166–190.

³⁸ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, p. 25.

Throughout his famous *Essay*, Newman castigated what he called the ‘Bible religion’ of Victorian Protestantism, arguing with scholarly acumen that it was heretical groups like the Arians who appealed directly to the Bible to overrule church tradition about Jesus Christ. Protestants, by swapping the Church’s stewardship of the apostolic faith for the lonely individual and his Bible, likewise forsake the weight of catholic tradition for the whims of private judgement.³⁹ Clearly, Newman’s equation of evangelicals with Arians hit Rainy hard.⁴⁰ Rainy also wants to disarm those Enlightenment despisers of classical Christianity who wield *Dogmengeschichte* as a sledgehammer against the Church’s historic faith. Radical critics like Strauss may be beyond repair, but perhaps renewed attention to the form of doctrine’s delivery would embolden a restatement of doctrine’s proper function in the life of the Church that could also assuage the growing popular unease felt toward classical creeds.

The ambitious and pugnacious defence of the irreducibly doctrinal nature of Christian faith promised in the opening pages of *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* should give pause to those interpreters who have judged Rainy as too quick to sacrifice doctrine at the altar of ecclesiastical necessity.⁴¹ Only a year before Rainy delivered these lectures, the dean of Westminster Abbey, A. P. Stanley, gave a set of talks in Edinburgh on the history of the Scottish church. The broad churchman’s addresses were superficial but provocative: Stanley was friendly with moderates in the Church of Scotland like John Tulloch and he varnished their vision of a national church that was inclusive and non-dogmatic. ‘Do you know what they’re saying, Dr. Rainy?’, goaded Alexander Whyte after the final lecture. ‘They’re saying that if Cunningham had been alive,

³⁹ Newman’s argument built on an earlier work, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London, 1833). Not only did Newman dismiss *sola scriptura* as fictitious, he considered it evidence that ‘to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant’. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1845), p. 8.

⁴⁰ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 5, 33.

⁴¹ E.g. Finlayson, *Unity and Diversity*, p. 8.

Stanley would not wait long for his answer.⁴² Rainy's published response, *Three Lectures on the Church of Scotland* (1872), shredded Stanley's slack research and Whiggish historiography, and reproached his Anglican condescension of Presbyterianism.⁴³ More importantly, Rainy resolutely opposed the broad church pursuit of church unity at the cost of doctrine and of religious influence without first converting the country to Christ.

The *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* is consistent, then, with Rainy's other publications in resisting the variegated, growing tendency in Victorian Christianity to marginalise or minimise the doctrinal content of faith.⁴⁴ At the same time, this does not mean he intends to defend doctrine in the same manner that his revered teachers William Cunningham and James Buchanan did. In the *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine*, Rainy establishes a very 'Hofmann-esque' thesis: when the Bible is (properly) understood foremost as an infallible record of God's great acts and deeds in history, salvation history provides the category for understanding how church doctrine is derived from historical revelation. The Church's interpretation of God's revelation in history as doctrine is necessary and inevitable – but Christian doctrine always needs to be comprehended within the wider process of salvation history.⁴⁵

The argument takes shape in the following lectures as Rainy investigates in turn the Old and New Testaments to discover how doctrine has been originally delivered.⁴⁶ Deeply traditional

⁴² Cited in Simpson, *Principal Rainy, Vol. 1*, p. 226. S. Brown provides commentary in 'Dean Stanley and the Controversy over his History of the Scottish Church, 1872', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 31 (2001), 145–172.

⁴³ Rainy, *Three Lectures on the Church of Scotland* (1872; reprint, Edinburgh, 1883).

⁴⁴ Compare to Rainy, 'Modern Theological Thought', p. 90, and Rainy, 'Dr. Mitchell on the Westminster Assembly', *Catholic Presbyterian* 10 (1883), pp. 185–193.

⁴⁵ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 32–33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–104.

presuppositions are brought to the task: Rainy brooks little sympathy for modern critics who impute Israel's religion to their heightened awareness of divine immanence in history; he harbours no reservations about calling the Bible 'supernatural' and 'inspired'; and he insists that God's revelation in history has been faithfully gathered into the canonical Scriptures. Accordingly, his overview of Scripture yields the conclusion, no less traditional, that God's revelation to Israel contains 'teaching so permanent in its matter, so direct and unambiguous in its terms, and so precise in the convictions it was fitted to produce, that we may reasonably call it doctrinal'.⁴⁷

Unmistakably, however, Rainy is taking leave of the manner in which evangelicals had traditionally derived doctrine from the Old Testament. The keyword is now 'historical communion'.⁴⁸ Divine disclosure into the warp and woof of history was inevitable, given God's desire to relate with those who are 'radically creatures of days and years and generations'.⁴⁹ Nor could God reveal his character, his abhorrence of sin, and his promises of blessing, fully and instantly, for revelation was always accommodated to Israel's historical context and was progressively disclosed in such a way that keynote teachings resounded evermore lucid over the course of its history. With reference to the facts of revelation, Rainy cautions:

There be might a process of teaching by successive lessons, so delivered that each lesson should be abstract and general, – 'doctrinal' so we say, – coming as a maxim that shall always be applicable to that case as long as human knowledge subsists under its earthly considerations. It might conceivably have been so; but such was not the divine method. From the first, God has dealt with men *in the concrete*. He has dealt with them about facts; He has

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 39, 41. See also Rainy, *Introductory Lecture*, p. 3.

taught them through events, – those facts and events being the centre and the hinge of His teachings.⁵⁰

God's teaching in the Old Testament is definite but incomplete, so the Church should only speak of Old Testament 'doctrine', or use the Old Testament to proof its doctrine, with a tentativeness born from the recognition of a revelation fully bound to the contingency of Israel's historical existence. Israel's beliefs about the meaning of God's words and deeds should be considered as 'rising out of, and returning into, a historical process' that anticipates Christ.⁵¹ The New Testament records the very climax of history, where God's promissory acts in Israel's history find their terminus in Christ – incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended in glory. Rainy unequivocally rules out a progression of revelation beyond the apostolic witness to Christ. That revelation is finished, however, does not mean it is frozen. Much like Newman in his *Essay*, Rainy waxes eloquently of revelation as 'fathomless fountains', capable of 'endless progress' through the Church's worshipful contemplation of it; Scripture is 'pregnant' with fresh teaching capable of guiding the Church through the travails of each and every epoch.⁵²

There is precedent within Rainy's own Reformed tradition from the federal theologians of the seventeenth century who sought a methodology centred on the biblical covenants as the progressive fulfilment in history of God's promise of salvation.⁵³ Yet it is clear that Rainy is moving beyond them in the degree to which he sinks revelation into historical reality. Revelation is salvation history (which Rainy translates as 'history of redemption').⁵⁴ God has revealed himself and his will not foremost in teachings or propositions but in and through historical acts. This means that the

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 36, his emphasis.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 67.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 100, 104, 105.

⁵³ C. Link, 'Föederaltheologie', *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Bd. 3, 4th ed., ed. H.-D. Betz et al. (Tübingen, 2000), pp. 172–75.

⁵⁴ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 86, 95, 359.

Bible is not a syllabus of doctrines but a record of salvation history. It tells of who God is by what he has done, how his deeds have seized the hearts and minds of those who first witnessed them. Scripture is *essentially* a history book, Rainy declares, a record of the decisive persons and events of the story of salvation.

The revamping of the traditional Protestant attributes of Scripture in light of the Bible's nature in respect of salvation history follows. For Rainy, as for the Erlangen theology, Scripture has singular authority in the Church because nowhere else is there a 'sealed and unalterable record' of the facts of redemption.⁵⁵ Scripture is sufficient because it is an accurate and immutable record of salvation history. As a record of historical events rather than a fixed itinerary of teachings, Scripture is divinely adapted to be a fertile and flexible standard as God's people themselves develop in history.⁵⁶ At every stage of the Church's life the historical facts of redemption, especially those clustered around the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, 'should lay hold of their mind, mould their thoughts and their impressions, and become a means of teaching, a foundation of it, which nothing else could be'.⁵⁷ These are facts of such power and truth that they seize the whole person, facts of such magnitude that the light the Church shines on them from sundry vantage points of its history never fully pierces their depths or circumscribe their breadth. The perspicuity of Scripture is likewise rooted in the historicity of revelation. Christians who would struggle to understand an abstraction or a theory can grasp the significance of the fundamental historical events of redemption, for even the lowliest believer shares the same orientation to the 'knowledge of realities' as those to whom revelation was first given.⁵⁸

While Rainy lapses on occasion into the older language of a 'system of teaching' or a 'body of doctrine' in the New Testament,

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 78, 104.

⁵⁶ Compare the statement in Hofmann, *Weissagung und Erfüllung*, Bd. 1, p. 44.

⁵⁷ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 93–98.

on the whole, he vehemently maintains that neither Old nor New Testament should be approached as a compendium of doctrines.⁵⁹ One result of the dominance of a propositional rather than historical view of revelation was to leave churches constantly confusing the finality of revelation with the finality of their own dogmas, creeds, or traditions.⁶⁰ Instead, the sequence of historical fact to interpretation in Scripture is essential and exemplary for Christian reflection. 'The grand distinction of the Christian revelation', he insists, 'is that the facts which lie at the foundation of *it* are the adequate and eternal embodiment of those truths, not imperfect and transient illustrations of them'.⁶¹ From this history, which knits together the historical facts of revelation and the initial impression of divine history in the minds of God's people (what could be called biblical doctrine), doctrine emerges as the Church interprets the facts of salvation history recorded in Scripture. Not only is Rainy, like Hofmann, making a tacit distinction between biblical theology and systematic theology, biblical doctrine and church doctrine, he is exhorting his tradition to better distinguish its humble house of doctrine from the superlative building materials.

When Rainy turns to examine how church doctrine is formed from the biblical story of salvation, his break with the theological method of classical Protestantism is unmistakable.⁶² His definition of doctrine as 'determinations of what men are led to hold to be true on the authority of Revelation' presupposes revelation as a narrative of historical events rather than a collection of polished or semi-cut doctrines and underscores – and this, in contrast to older theology –

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

⁶⁰ Another was to leave historical revelation pounded flat and painted monochrome for the sake of a dogmatic system. Rainy explicitly followed Hofmann's argument on the biblical canon, namely, that its manifoldness reflects the fact that salvation history itself combines the unity of truth appropriate to the purposes of its subject, God, and the diversity appropriate to the manner of revelation, history (pp. 85–87, 105).

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 101, his emphasis.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 106–174.

the formation of doctrine as an involved human process.⁶³ 'I must select words which enable my mind to mark how it is taught to think, as well as how it is taught to feel or act', he avows.⁶⁴

This utterance divulges the lure the Erlangen theology – which they themselves described as a theology of fact – must have held for Rainy. 'Historical communion' is not an excuse to slough off the objectivity of revelation. On the contrary, it secures an objective, supernatural revelation *and* combines it with attention to the subjective side of Christian belief. It admits the significant role of the believer in creating doctrine via the mind's determination of revealed facts. Doctrine is not simply the message of Scripture. It is rather 'our holding up as ours the truth, made ours, which the Father of Lights delivered to us as His'.⁶⁵ And not even those who scorn theological subtleties for simple biblical expressions, Rainy adds, can avoid restating biblical words and concepts into what they have *determined* it means. In sum, doctrine is the terminus of a complex process in which the meaning of the Bible is, as Rainy puts it, 're-embodied' into the Church's thoughts and words.⁶⁶

Rainy does not intend, however, to discredit orthodoxy by making doctrine appear all too human. So, he quickly attempts to back-fill the ditch he has opened between divine revelation and church doctrine, significantly, through possibilities inherent in the salvation history paradigm. First, *Heilsgeschichte* enables the contemporary believer to participate in the original facts of revelation. As he wrote earlier: 'The divine truth is designed to lead us into the understanding of divine history, in which history it calls us to confess and to claim our own place'.⁶⁷ The Church does not form doctrine by gazing from afar on the mind of God or his works. Through the Spirit, it is plunged into salvation history; there it

⁶³ Ibid., p. 107.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 117. Or, 'the meaning of Scripture...is what God meant;' the 'meaning of doctrine...is what we mean' (p. 118).

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 112, 126.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 82–83.

encounters a revelation which – as it was disclosed in historical acts and transactions – has *already* crossed the qualitative gap between the divine mind and human history.⁶⁸

Second, far from consigning the Church to be ‘haunted by perpetual doubt’ of the clarity of revelation, ‘the historical structure of the Scripture fits it to afford us a guarantee that we do correctly catch its drift, and that when we read it we are dealing with teaching which is indeed “in part” only, yet is firm, definite, and reliable’.⁶⁹ As such, despite all that he has professed about the authentic humanity of church doctrine, he assures listeners that the distinction between church doctrine and biblical teaching is mainly a formal distinction in regard to the fundamental doctrines. Enthusing that *Heilsgeschichte* could facilitate ecumenical consensus on essential doctrines, Rainy consciously stands himself under the shadow of Reformed orthodoxy’s quest for a unified Protestantism gathered around a coterie of fundamental articles.⁷⁰ As a protégé of Cunningham, he knew that the Reformed irenic was spurned by the punctilious Lutherans in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But could the perspicuous facts of salvation history secure the consensus on fundamental doctrines that the Reformed orthodox sought in vain?

Third, even as *Heilsgeschichte* dashes the confidence of the older Protestant dogmatic, it further mitigates the disconcerting ditch between historical revelation and church doctrine by assuring the Church that its doctrine is invested with the vast wisdom of the catholic mind because it was and is determined in a fellowship of the ages. The ahistorical concept of revelation assumed by the old Protestant divines, charges Rainy, let them exalt the sufficiency of Scripture by belittling the role of the Church in the determination of

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 119–121. For background see M. Friedrich, *Von Marburg bis Leuenberg: die lutherisch-reformierte Gegensatz und seine Überwindung* (Waltrop, 1999).

the rule of faith. Salvation history binds the Christian mind and experience of all ages to the 'mighty acts of the Lord' recorded in Scripture. As a result, the catholic mind is a major factor in the ongoing formation of doctrine. Tradition shapes the present Christian mind (for good and bad) to such an extent that inherited doctrines could be outgrown but never fully shed.⁷¹ Of course, traditional church beliefs are not infallible, but the present task of re-embodying Scripture should always be weighed against past results of that same process.

It is interesting to observe that Hofmann's method carried within itself a back-check to avoid a purely idiosyncratic version of the faith: doctrine, unfolded from the individual's experience of salvation, was then measured or proved against the Church's experience of the same salvation, and ultimately against the authoritative record of salvation in Scripture.⁷² This is his famous 'Scriptural proof' [*Schriftbeweis*]. While Rainy denies outright – in covert reference to Hofmann's position – 'that human faculties can construe the developed Christianity ... out of the experience', he is clearly offering a similar back-check distinguished by a more guarded assessment of the ability of experience to correctly re-embody the story of salvation history, whether writ small in the individual heart or large on 1800 years of church tradition.⁷³

Rainy realises that what he terms the 'historical delivery of doctrine' requires an account of how doctrine develops, since the

⁷¹ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 137–138.

⁷² Hofmann, *Der Schriftbeweis*, Bd. 1, pp. 1–33. Rainy appears to be referring specifically to page 31 of *Der Schriftbeweis*, where Hofmann writes: 'Out of the self-certainty of his experience of new birth, the theologian gathers "the doctrinal whole" that then receives its confirmation through the proof of Scripture.'

⁷³ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 132–137. Schleiermacher is standing behind him. Rainy reproves Schleiermacher for constricting revelation to experience, but admits his defective *Glaubenslehre* contains a precious truth: 'there is a verification of the truth in the life, and a congruity between the two' (p. 131). B. Gerrish, 'From *Dogmatik* to *Glaubenslehre*: A Paradigm Change in Modern Theology?' in *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago, 1993), 239–248, tracks this trend in modern theology.

Church's 're-embodiment' of the facts of redemptive history as its doctrine is itself part of the ongoing process of salvation history.⁷⁴ Many, observes Rainy, are now cognizant that 'believing theologians' in Germany have been assuming doctrinal development for some time. Newman too deserves credit. Although Newman's new church still professes to be unruffled by the findings of the new history and to remain steadfast before the pull of time, the decades since the *Essay*'s publication have seen the idea of doctrinal development garner acceptance among Protestant theologians, even if, Rainy reproves, 'development' risks becoming a sloppy theological catchphrase.⁷⁵ Yet Rainy also realizes that he is now treading on controversial ground within his own tradition. On one hand, the older Protestant theology – of whom his predecessor in the church history chair at New College, William Cunningham, provides a sterling example – had permitted only a *logical* development of doctrine.⁷⁶ Rainy lashes out at this perspective, criticising its view of revelation as a 'direct delivery' of doctrines from which ancillary doctrines can be inferred.⁷⁷ The older theology, he holds, has been guilty of 'the frequent exemplification of excess and over confidence, in handling doctrine'.⁷⁸ Much of the popular distaste for

⁷⁴ See Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 175–233. Rainy's thinking on doctrinal development are treated by Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids, 1979), pp. 37–53, and Mark Karlberg, 'Doctrinal Development in Scripture and Tradition: a Reformed Assessment of the Church's Theological Task', *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995), 401–418.

⁷⁵ Only a year later, Rainy would reflect similarly on the vagaries attached to 'evolution' in *Evolution and Theology: Inaugural Address delivered in the New College, Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1874), pp. 6–7. Confirmation can be found in A. Sell, 'Evolution: Theory and Theme', *Faith and Thought* 104 (1977–78), 202–220.

⁷⁶ Along with Cunningham's trenchant critique of Newman's *Essay* published in 1846 in the *North British Review* and republished as the 'Romanist Theory of Development', in *Discussions on Church Principles: Popish, Erastian and Presbyterian* (Edinburgh, 1863), pp. 35–77, see also his essay 'Calvin and Beza', in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862; reprint, Edinburgh, 2000).

⁷⁷ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, p. 181.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

doctrine stems from 'the prodigality of distinction and inference' whereby theologians, lusting for a truly systematic depiction of faith, have piece-by-piece erected doctrinal superstructures that soar far above the life-giving facts of redemption held in the biblical history.⁷⁹ If the manifoldness of God's creation makes inferential conclusions in science provisional and apt to be often revised, should not inference from revealed truth make theologians equally cautious, he asks, taking aim at the theological Baconianism characteristic of his own tradition?⁸⁰ On the other hand, Rainy admits that many Protestants suspect a theory of doctrinal development compromises Scripture as a sufficient rule of faith, because, as with the Tractarians, the Church then 'develops' the Bible to its completion as church dogma.

While Rainy defends the development of doctrine as a 'function of the Church ... belonging to her duty, connected with a right use of her privileges, and indeed indispensable to her life', neither does he abandon the Protestant belief in the sufficiency of Scripture.⁸¹ Simply put: doctrine should develop not away from but *up* to Scripture. The 'great world of truth'⁸² held in the Bible is never fully explored; Church proclamation is the *pursuit* of the fulsome truth contained in Scripture. A true theory of development, then, departs not from Scripture but from the sub-apostolic Church, the very first instance of the Christian mind engaging the 'deep facts' of God's saving action in history.⁸³ Assured by Hofmann's work on the canon that the substance of the canonical New Testament was widely

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 161–4.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 167. E.g. J. Buchanan, 'Systematic Theology', in *Inauguration of the New College of the Free Church, Edinburgh: November, M.DCCC.L.* (Edinburgh, 1851), pp. 79–100; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (New York, 1871), pp. 1–17. More generally see M. Gauvreau, 'The Empire of Evangelicalism: Varieties of Common Sense in Scotland, Canada, and the United States', in M. Noll et al. (eds), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990* (New York, 1994), 219–252.

⁸¹ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, p. 183.

⁸² Ibid., p. 190. Compare the expression to Newman, *Essay*, p. 27.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 201.

circulated at a very early date, Rainy maintains the early Church had the same 'thorough acquaintance with the history of the great facts of divine revelation' that the Church had after the crystallisation of the canon, as well as a strong and joyful hold of the facts and their doctrinal implications, even if they could not yet do full justice to it. The early Church was akin to a new convert, Bible in hand and heart afire, in possession of the full truth but not yet of the fullness of that truth. The doctrinal attainment of the early Church as a real though diminished reflection of the light of revelation must be considered the point of exit for the development of doctrine.⁸⁴

At this point, a tension is apparent between the open process of development and the finality of a developed doctrine. The former, which Rainy wagers to risk a real errand in the wilderness, renders provisional each and every doctrine determined by the collective Christian mind. Even the catholic dogmas of the early Church are not beyond correction, improvement or supplementation.⁸⁵ True to form, however, he recoils from radical conclusions: past thinking of the Church on topics like Christ, Trinity, grace and free will, while not, strictly speaking, final for Protestants, were handled with such dexterity and precision that material alteration is not really conceivable. Just how consistent is his mediating position? This question sits uncomfortably in the closing lecture, a programmatic piece which, given the future ecclesiastical status of its speaker, was pregnant with repercussions for the future of his ecclesiastical tradition.⁸⁶

The final chapter plots an advance course through a challenge looming for confessional churches like the Free Church: creedal revision. Rainy's repeated insistence on the necessity of a written confession (e.g. pp. 248–249, 250–251, 255) and his wish to find the

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 185, 191–195, 198–199. Rainy was one of many Scots at this time keenly interested in patristic literature. See D. Wright, "'From a quarter so totally unexpected': Translation of the Early Church Fathers in Victorian Scotland", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 30 (2000), pp. 124–169.

⁸⁵ See 'Modern Theological Thought', p. 82.

⁸⁶ See Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 235–290.

ideally slow and steady development of doctrine reflected in a reverent and cautious practice of creedal revision (pp. 242, 275), bespeak an ecclesiastical leader desirous of a thoroughly 'conservative arrangement' between his tradition's extensive body of doctrine and the possibility that parts of that corpus no longer resonated with church conscience.⁸⁷ Rumblings of discontent had been heard in Scotland, at least, for some time. The United Presbyterians would pass a declaratory act on the Westminster Confession in 1879; calls to revise the confession began coming before the Free Church Assembly in the 1880s.⁸⁸ To his credit, *Delivery and Development of Doctrine* shows that Rainy was seeing well beyond the older question then taxing contemporaries, namely, which church office bearers need subscribe to the confession, to the profounder issues of the very nature and necessity of church creeds and confessions.⁸⁹

A creed functions to express that portion of doctrines a church considers fundamental. For Rainy, 'fundamental articles' of faith (approximating what other church traditions designate as dogma) connotes those doctrines deemed to be so integral to the Church's life and mission that to deny them would be to subvert the Church and rupture the body of Christ. The logic of *Heilsgeschichte* affects the function of a creed by helping the Church 'utter the present faith

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 277.

⁸⁸ The literature concerning Presbyterian creedal revision in the English-speaking world in this period is considerable, including: D. Fortson, III, 'New School Calvinism and the Presbyterian Creed', *Journal of Presbyterian History* 82 (2004), 221–243; B. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York, 1991); W. Klempa, 'Canadian Presbyterianism and the Westminster Standards', *Papers of the Canadian Society of Presbyterian History* 23 (1998), 38–51; R. Swanton, 'The Westminster Confession and the Declaratory Statements', *Reformed Theological Review* 44 (1985), pp. 13–19; P. Matheson, 'Transforming the Creed', in S. Brown (ed.), *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World* (Edinburgh, 2000), 119–31; F. Holmes, *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 123–133.

⁸⁹ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 248–9.

so as to bring out the consent of past ages with our own'.⁹⁰ For there should be a durable identity to the Church's core doctrines, which any new creed or confession must retain unless it deigns to deny the organic continuity of the Church in history or cast aspersion upon the clarity of the facts of salvation. At the same time, he is vehement that the Church has no right to speak except from present conviction. The intrinsic stability of the Church's fundamental doctrines must not petrify the form of a creed. A Protestant church should neither permit creeds to bar the pathways opened by divine revelation nor protect them from the attrition of doctrinal development. There was no lack of modern detractors to remind Rainy that Protestants' confessions often function in a manner indistinguishable from Roman dogma, enticing the Christian to a habit of deference to the human document and the consent it purports to express. This is illegitimate, he contends. Creeds are human, and to treat them as inviolable is to make an 'idle flourish' of the Protestant claim that the Word of God stands over the Church. Every branch of the Church has a right and duty to hold its creeds subject to correction, 'for as the inspired teaching is before the Church, so the Church is before the confession'.⁹¹

If the Church must not flinch from this charge, it should also not move hastily against fundamental doctrines. The perspicuity of the acts of God recorded in the Bible, as well as the organic nature of the Church, ensure that Christian fundamentals are stable. Consequently, the living voice of the Church will utter substantially the same 'credo' as past generations. Rainy can even speak of the fundamentals as a 'permanent acquisition' and 'fixed possession'.⁹² In fact, two strata exist in any given confession of faith: fundamental doctrines that aim for a catholic presentation of the Christian faith, and peripheral doctrines, born in and bound to the issues of a specific time and place. The latter, because they tend to stray further

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 272.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 274–275, 397.

⁹² Ibid., 270, 273.

from the central determinations of salvation history, are more liable to error or redundancy, and therefore to abridgement, correction or elimination as the Church's mind develops. The former are really susceptible only to deeper penetration. Creedal revision should incrementally and cautiously aim to scale down a confession to focus more sharply on the centre of faith rather than swell it with littoral doctrines; it aspires for the fundamentals that unite across time and place, rather than doctrines that retrench time-bound peculiarities. And this task now confronts his own church tradition, Rainy declares. God intends to bring Presbyterianism back to his Word to let its doctrine be affirmed or pared down.⁹³

Rainy's position has a common lineage in nineteenth-century Protestant theology. An effect of neo-Lutheranism's mutual debt to the evangelical awakening and Schleiermacher was its insistence that doctrine expresses the Church's *living* faith. Creeds should speak out those doctrines that the present church considers fundamental. The Christian mind of each and every age, after all, must re-embody the great facts of salvation for its own. Yet the constant revision of a creed according the whims of the age is far removed from his wholly conservative intent. As with Hofmann, the *Tatsache* of salvation history ensured that for Rainy doctrine and creeds are never merely descriptive of the Church's faith and the essential continuity of 'the church's familiar faith' in history is assured.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine lays out the key theological ideas and principles that moved the great ecclesiastical statesman Principal Rainy to action. Indeed, despite the accusations held against Rainy by some of his conservative interpreters, namely, that his decisive role in permitting biblical criticism and promoting church union and creedal revision in the Free Church sold out the

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 371–3.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 226.

Calvinist heritage of his church, his effort to historically validate and determine the form and function of church doctrine, exemplified both in his publications and in his ecclesiastical legislation and leadership, can be understood as an interrupted legacy of seventeenth-century Reformed federal theology. As Eberhard Busch has observed: 'Federal Theology oriented its attention ... not to the elevation and maintenance of theological truths, valid in and of themselves and ascertained as a system of abstract doctrine, but rather to the realisation that those truths occurred (and were occurring) on the horizon of human reality'.⁹⁵ The historicizing of revelation, church, and doctrine propounded by Rainy lies within the trajectory of the federalists' concern with divine accommodation in history and the Bible as a progressive record of the covenantal history of God with humankind. Despite its dissimilarity on many points with the work of his teacher Cunningham and the majority of evangelical and Reformed peers, Rainy's recasting of doctrine within the bounds of *Heilsgeschichte* was of Reformed lineage, even if it represents a 'minority report' in the tradition. And not insignificantly, federal theology was closely aligned with the quest for fundamental articles.

In any case, the reading offered above of *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* qualifies the prevailing depiction of Rainy as an opportunistic church leader. The problem raised by Ross as 'the greatest question posed by Rainy's career', specifically, 'how a man who was sufficiently representative of the Disruption to be the natural successor of Candlish came to preside over the

⁹⁵ E. Busch, 'Der Beitrag und Ertrag der Föderaltheologie für ein geschichtliches Verständnis der Offenbarung', in *Oikonomia: Heilsgeschichte als Thema der Theologie* (Hamburg, 1967), p. 173. Some German scholars have toyed with the possibility that Hofmann had absorbed federal theology from the 'awakened' Reformed pastor in Erlangen, Christian Krafft, who had converted a number of future neo-Lutherans, including Hofmann. But there is no proof. Regardless, Hofmann's *Heilsgeschichte* theology is unthinkable apart from the ground laid by federal theology. See further F. Mildenerger, 'Heilsgeschichte', *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Bd. 3, pp. 1584–1586.

dramatic liberalization of the FC [Free Church]?’ has proved difficult to answer, largely because historians have neglected Rainy’s mind.⁹⁶ As a result, all the ‘liberalizing’ flashpoints of Rainy’s tumultuous tenure as Free Church leader, such as his openness to biblical criticism and the theory of evolution, his handling of the Robertson Smith case, his determined pursuit of church unity among the Scottish denominations, and his efforts to relax subscription to the Westminster Standards appear as chapters in the career of a quintessential pragmatist, for whom the institutional survival of the Free Church was more important than any theological principle. Yet the flashpoints of his career all find their spark in *ideas* already laid out in *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine*. His openness to biblical criticism was not just a concession to placate progressives in the Free Church, but rather a firm conviction that divine revelation descended from above into ‘human tracks of thought and feeling’.⁹⁷ For all the ‘misty’ compromises struck in the Robertson Smith case that have rightly tainted Rainy’s reputation, his personal position on the so-called believing criticism was consistent with what he had earlier argued about the irreducibly historical delivery of revelation and the Church’s need to interpret the great acts of God in history. Similarly, his passion over the decades for church unity is not just ecclesiastical *Realpolitik*: Rainy firmly believed from very early in his career that the fundamental events of that ‘blessed history of redemption’ were so clear and powerful that they could draw all Christians into greater unity around fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, and in doing so, commend the faith anew to a troubled age.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ross, ‘Rainy, Robert (1826–1906)’, p. 691.

⁹⁷ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, p. 123. See further Rainy, *The Bible and Criticism: Four Lectures* (London, 1878).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201. See Rainy, *The Ecclesiastical Outlook. An Address delivered at New College, Edinburgh, at the Close of Session 1893–94* (Edinburgh, 1894).

Above all, the most controversial and far-reaching events of Rainy's career, namely, the Declaratory Act of 1892 and 1900 Act of Union with the United Presbyterians, embody theological ideas laid out explicitly in 1873. Rainy's emphasis on revelation as history thwarts the 'syllogistic manipulation' of Scripture that has spawned unwieldy systems of doctrine that no longer resonate with the faithful;⁹⁹ instead, he calls the Church back to the facts of redemptive history to let its creeds be reaffirmed, revised or rejected. As the Declaratory Act itself suggests by relaxing subscription to the 'essentials of the Reformed faith',¹⁰⁰ the intention of the act was not destructive but constructive: to contract church confession to those facts of salvation history which are so potent and perspicuous that the determination of their meaning by the Church in history has achieved a stable consensus on fundamental doctrines. A confessional contraction to fundamental doctrines naturally abets union between denominations – what Rainy consummated with such effort and anguish in the creation of the United Free Church in 1900. And how Rainy's belief that a confession is the Church's offspring and not its sire would come to agitate the Presbyterian churches of Scotland in the later years of the Victorian era!¹⁰¹ 'For as the inspired teaching is before the Church, so the Church is before the confession'.¹⁰² If doctrine is the utterance of faith, not of revelation, a thorny legal problem with large ecclesiological ramifications follows: could a church alter its doctrinal standards to reflect the development of its creed, as the Free Church did through its 1892 Declaratory Act and 1900 Act of Union with the United Presbyterians, and still be the same church? The rump who broke away from the Free Church in the wake of the Declaratory Act to

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 379.

¹⁰⁰ 'Declaratory Act of the General Assembly of the Free Church, 1892 – Anent the Confession of Faith', in *Corpus Confessionum*, Vol. 18 (Berlin and Leipzig, 1937), pp. 802–04.

¹⁰¹ See 'United Free Church Act anent Spiritual Independence of the Church, 1906'. *Corpus Confessionum*, Vol. 18, pp. 811–813.

¹⁰² Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, p. 274.

form the Free Presbyterian Church did not think so, nor did the House of Lords in 1904 when they awarded all Free Church deeds, trusts, and property to the minority who dissented from the formation of United Free Church.¹⁰³

In sum, *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* makes explicit that while Rainy heard the ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of the ‘Sea of Faith’, and sought to respond to those voices inside and outside the Church who protested that classical church doctrine was keeping Christ from them rather than bringing them closer, he refused to allow the Church’s historic confession to ebb.¹⁰⁴ To accomplish this task, he adopted a thoroughly historical approach to revelation, Church, and doctrine, despite the fact it was still widely suspect within his evangelical and Reformed tradition, and leaned hard upon *die Erlanger Theologie* of Hofmann (and to a lesser extent, Newman), who had already tried in his own way to combine a conservative theological agenda with the century’s new historical consciousness.

To revisit Robert Rainy as a thinker is, of course, not to claim that his ideas were correct or even hale for the Scottish church. In fact, when historians identify Rainy’s shortcomings as a leader they should not only point to the apparent ‘complacency and opportunism’ that ‘accounts in part for the loss of ground which the FC suffered’, but also take note of the shortcomings of his ideas.¹⁰⁵ Specifically, the argument in *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* lacks execution – and this would echo later in his career.

¹⁰³ Excellent analysis is provided in the following: J. MacLeod, *The Second Disruption: The Free Church in Victorian Scotland and the Origins of the Free Presbyterian Church* (East Linton, 2000), pp. 179–232; idem, ‘The Second Disruption: The Origins of the Free Presbyterian Church of 1893’, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 16 (1998), 5–18; idem, ‘Revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Free Church of Scotland’s Declaratory Act of 1892’, in J. Duncan (ed.), *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century* (Fearn, 2003), 343–366; K. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland. The Free Church Case 1900–1904* (Edinburgh, 1988); Cheyne, *The Transformation of the Kirk*, pp. 60–87.

¹⁰⁴ Rainy, *Delivery and Development*, pp. 142–3.

¹⁰⁵ Ross, ‘Rainy, Robert (1826–1906)’, p. 691.

Rainy had long fretted over the tendency of German theologians to 'abridge history' by squeezing facts into 'speculative theories of development', and so, as we have seen, he attempted to pursue the topic of the historical delivery and development of doctrine with his feet firmly on the ground of historical fact and experience rather than with his head in the clouds of speculative theory.¹⁰⁶ In the absence of a theory of development, the complex question of the origin and progress of doctrine will have to be accounted for via rigorous historical phenomenology, or, as he puts it, 'from below'.¹⁰⁷ So a historical itinerary of fundamental doctrines is now expected, nay required, by the course of his argument. But Rainy falls silent. He offers no list in *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine*, apart from a few vague references to the doctrine of God, Christ, and salvation, as inerasable achievements of classical orthodoxy. Having displayed an historian's not unwarranted disregard for 'top-down' approaches to the history of theology, it is understandable that he would not presume the core Christian doctrines. After all, establishing the 'fundamentals' or a 'mere Christianity' is far from easy.¹⁰⁸ But to neglect a reconstruction of fundamental doctrine from the record of church history leaves unfulfilled his attempt to reckon with what the Church throughout history has really determined of revelation as its doctrines. This is not an abstract grievance. Twenty years later, during the raucous debate leading up to the passing of the Declaratory Act (a piece of legislation widely considered as vintage

¹⁰⁶ Rainy, *Introductory Lecture*, p. 12. In contrast, for example, to his United Presbyterian peer, James Orr, whose idealist-inspired *The Progress of Dogma* (1901; reprint, Vancouver, 2000) streamlined the history of doctrine as the logical unfolding of the divine mind indwelling the church, as well as to the trend of making a 'central dogma' the centrifugal point of a church's doctrinal development – what the Church of Scotland's William Hastie would employ at century's end in *The Theology of the Reformed Church in its Fundamental Principles* (Edinburgh, 1904).

¹⁰⁷ 'From below' is an often-used expression (e.g. pp. 34, 75, 81, 89): 'Modern Theological Thought', p. 96.

¹⁰⁸ Argued forcefully by E. Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History* (Oxford, 2005).

Rainy),¹⁰⁹ Rainy argued that the substance of the Reformed faith could be deduced from the body of Reformed confessional documents, but, remarkably, fell silent as to what would be included therein.¹¹⁰ As the act's critics pointed out, the key phrase – 'substance of the Reformed Faith' – was left undefined. Ultimately, Rainy reneged on the promise of a truly historical delivery of doctrine, and it is difficult to ascertain if his confidence in history to secure such fundamentals wavered, or if his confidence was so great that he was sure he did not have to make the obvious explicit.

To revisit Robert Rainy as a thinker, then, is to insist that the theological and philosophical ideas circulating through Victorian Britain that shaped the actions of this 'embodied *apologia* of his Church' need to be comprehended, or else we risk misunderstanding this significant church leader and his legacy.¹¹¹ 'The philosopher need address himself only to the best minds of an age – perhaps only to the best minds of all times', wrote the historian of ideas, Gertrude Himmelfarb. 'The historian of ideas must also consider the representative minds of an age, which may be the "second-best" minds.'¹¹² Robert Rainy, the Free Church's ecclesiastical statesman in what he himself described as an age of violent change and confusion, was a second-best mind whose ideas were of first-rate importance for the Church in Victorian Scotland and beyond.¹¹³

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¹⁰⁹ Among others, K. Ross, 'Declaratory Articles' in *Dictionary of Scottish Theology and Church History*, pp. 237–238.

¹¹⁰ See 'Overture Anent Declaratory Act', in *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1892* (Edinburgh, 1892), pp. 145–79.

¹¹¹ The phrase is from Simpson, *Principal Rainy, Vol. 1*, p. 1.

¹¹² G. Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (London, 1968), pp. x–xi.

¹¹³ Rainy, *Address to the Students of the New College, Edinburgh, At the Close of the Session 1881–82* (Edinburgh, 1882), pp. 5–6.

